2018

Dominoes

Karina Le
School of the Arts

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The thing about war, he says with an ancient, accent-heavy voice, is that there are no winners. I stare at my grandfather from across the table, the dominoes smooth between my fingers as I pause away from my next move. Wary, (I must keep an eye on his quick ones) assuring myself that this was not a tactic to catch me off guard as the colorful dominoes shined in my favor. I place them down—face down—and open my ears.

The thing about war, he places his dominoes face down as well, is that you cannot forget the smoke and the dirt and the praying. He stretches the last word with a sickly sigh, his fingers coming over to the bridge of his nose to pitch it. You can never forget the praying. The hymns and the whispered farewells are the hardest to etch out of your head. Do you want to hear what they said?

He continues without pause. He begins drumming his fingers against the table, and I instinctively look at them. His meticulously filed nails create a soft drumming, soft only because of the grime under them. My awareness on his nails muddles his Vietnamese, deep and somber. Though I do not focus on his words, the sound is enough to give it away. I know he doesn't talk about the guns; he doesn't talk proudly about his friends; he doesn't dare speak the names of the ones he knew. He just looks to the side, I follow his line of sight and see the incense burning silently in its pot, and I can understand for a moment.

The thing about war, other words are hitting the walls and there is a gong in my head sounding like a mournful church bell, is that there are no heroes.

He speaks again, rapidly as if the words would vanish if he gives them another thought. (There's this fear of forgetting, that he turns into a fear of talking about the war. If he talked about it, the words would fly so quickly out of his mouth that they would leave his head to mix with the air. Sometimes, he jokes, that he would chase after these lost words in his dreams, across the plains and into the wild. He does not want to forget. So, in turn, he sometimes does not speak at all.) So he talks as if he's spitting fire, fast, messily, and like he was going to die from the searing hot coals piling in his lungs. But I cannot focus quickly enough to make out the important parts.

Yet, in my daze, I hear the ring of simple words, the small breaths of relief from his fear of forgetting. The forest. The budding flowers that slept on the side of his march. There was the sky on a good day. The rain on the bad. He describes the sunset and sunrise and how seeing these sights felt like he was ascending to the next plane.

Yet I was still stuck there, he laughs with a pitched bark—disappointment hanging from his voice—still stuck with the men and not with the Buddhas. Still there with the dirt and the rain. Still there, with a country that was not free—that could not be free. His eyes turn muddy.

Then, snapping as if he's a bean sprout, he wakes up from the mud. He changes the subject quickly, instead opting to describe one of the beauties he found in the war.

He describes one sunrise as a sign from the higher plane, calling out to him. They were resting on one of the cliffs (and I remember mentally checking the places he could've been. Not Halong Bay—that was too far north, wasn't it?) and he sat off to the cliffs, his shoeless feet off threatening to swing into the sea. He can't remember what he was fiddling with, but he was fiddling with something he is sure. He was watching off to the side of the cliff (You already said that—he is quick to counter with a hush, waving his hands as he continues without pause) and the sky was a distant fog of colors.

The rainy season was upon them, and the water's mist was lifting high to the sky—so high that he often wondered when he would see the sun again. It seemed to stretch for days upon weeks upon months since he had last seen the sun. Worst of all, the rainy season meant that he would have to sleep on the corpses of the dead that were mixed in the mud, dirt, and blood of the battlefield.

The rainy season also meant the men were acting in accordance with the weather—which was always melancholic. There were countless rumors upon seeing the ghost of a fellow, fallen comrade, or there were whispers of enemy attacks hidden in the mist. The rainy season meant a dreariness no one could shake off. He would know, because as he sat there he felt a sinking sensation, like the ground wished to mix with his skin. A part of him wished for it too, silently in the corner of his mind. This part began to grow bigger and bigger until he felt his eyes close as his body leaned forward, ready to propel him into the mist.

Then, in that moment (he leans into his hands), the fog lifted—a miracle, in and of itself—and showed to him a sky he couldn't believe he saw, a sun that he couldn't believe he had the pleasure to see. His back was straight. He wasn't leaning anymore. He simply sat as he saw the sky.

It was a vibrant splash of a bright pink, mixing along with its sisters: yellow and red. They spun gleefully around, twirling and twirling until they dropped to reveal the Sun. And Grandfather sat there, still fiddling the something in his hands, and watched the sky's dance. He watched their ring dancing turn into a crown for the Sun, as He rose up into the sky, revealing Himself without any cover of fog or mist. Revealing himself to the world, as if to say, I am here and you are here as well.

The thing about war, he adds with a glaze eye and a hanging jaw, is that only you—the soldier—could find a reason to keep fighting.

He admits, with a low head, that he found tears grasping onto his lashes that day. He wanted to tell his fellow soldiers of the sight, but he was afraid that the vision would fade from his eyes. So he sat there, alone with the metal something in his hands, still twisted in his fingers. Grandfather sat there alone for a very long time, he adds for further emphasis. He sat there for so long that he thought he could see the sun stomp away from his sight, which gave way for the moon.

The thing about war—he picks up his dominoes from the glossy table—is that it'll put a nail onto your coffin. Whether it be to death, or to your reason for freedom.

I don't pick up the dominoes. Was there a difference between the two?

He looks up at me, brown eyes faded and his laugh lines almost vanishing from his sunken face. No.

The magic stops. Time steps backward. I am in the same living room, with the same Grandpa, with the same dominoes, with the same incense filling my lungs. There is a small bowl ringing. It is Grandmother, humming her hymns softly to herself as she dips another incense stick into her offering bowl. I flicker my eyes back to the grandfather in front of me, humming

along to her hymns.

There are no forests here, no budding flowers along the road. There are no sunsets, no sunrises. There's no disappointment, no dirt or mud to trench through. There's no rainy season, no metal somethings to fiddle with. There isn't anything more to say about war. There's nothing else to say.

There's only the man in front of me, looking down at his domino pieces. He did not stare me straight in the eye. He did not pause the game to say anything. He did not speak of his hatred, his fears, his eventual runaway tales. There was only the ticking of the clock behind me, the snoring of my mother on the pull-out chair, my grandmother's hymns, and the finger drumming of my grandfather to fill the space in between.

I can't say anything. He can't say anything. There was nothing to say but secrets. Nothing to tell but vague gestures and closed ears.

The thing about war—I place a domino down, its sound like a sweet harp on the glossy table—is that sometimes there is nothing to say at all.

Karina Le
School of the Arts
Grade 12